

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING AN ORGANIZATIONAL VISION

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

An organizational vision does not exist for the Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department. As dynamic as the organization is, it is simply responding to day to day issues while implementing programs as they are recommended.

The purpose of this research paper was to determine the need for an organizational vision as well as identify the elements necessary to develop a vision and strategic plan to facilitate the implementation of that vision.

The methodology employed for this research were descriptive and evaluative. A review of current literature was undertaken. Three area fire chiefs were interviewed as well as a Pastor of a local non-denominational, Christian church and the following research questions were answered:

1. What is an organizational vision?
2. Is strategic planning necessary for the implementation of an organizational vision?
3. What are the key elements necessary to develop and implement an organizational vision?
4. Is organizational culture pertinent to the development and implementation of an organizational vision?

5. What are the advantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?
6. What are the disadvantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?

Responses provided to the research questions in the interviews were compared to the findings of the literature review and comparisons were drawn to challenge the findings.

The results of this research identify the need to develop an organizational vision as well as the development of a strategic plan for the implementation of this vision. The vision must be far reaching but attainable, inspirational and measurable. The strategic plan must have clearly defined goals and objectives, the commitment of top management, adequate resource allocation, an evaluation process and most importantly identify the organizational culture.

It is the recommendation of this study that the Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department utilize its 1999 labor/management retreat to develop an organizational vision and begin the planning process for the implementation of that vision.

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INTRODUCTION

History illustrates that there have been many great leaders with a vision. John F. Kennedy, Jr., had a vision of sending a man to the moon, Thomas Edison wanted to illuminate the world, and Martin Luther King had a dream. There are even biblical references. "My child, don't lose sight of good planning and insight. Hang on to them, for they fill you with life and bring you honor and respect." (Proverbs 3:21-22). All these visions captured the imagination of and provided the inspiration for many individuals who helped these visions become a reality. Visioning has been around for years. Many fire departments post their vision statement on the wall. Some are so long that no one in the organization could tell you what it is. Others list the organizational values right next to the vision, again with the same results. In comparison, few leaders have taken it beyond the thoughts or dreams first conceived in their minds. For every vision there must be a plan that will take the organization beyond what they are doing and why, to where they are going and how they will get there.

The purpose of this research was to determine if a need exists for an organizational vision in the Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department and to identify the process for the development and implementation of that vision. The success of those leaders who articulated their vision to direct the future of their organization was analyzed.

The interviews were conducted with fire service leaders as well as a Pastor of a local non-denominational, Christian church.

The methodology employed for this research was the descriptive and evaluative methods. The research questions to be answered were as follows:

1. What is an organizational vision?
2. Is strategic planning necessary for the implementation of an organizational vision?
3. What are the key elements necessary to develop and implement an organizational vision?
4. Is organizational culture pertinent to the development and implementation of an organizational vision?
5. What are the advantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?
6. What are the disadvantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department has undergone significant organizational and operational changes within the last eight years. Once a very stagnant, traditional, historically driven and managed fire department, it quickly became a very dynamic and fast changing organization.

With the arrival of a new visionary leader in 1990, Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department quickly became the organization on the fast track. Charged with several goals conditional to the new chief's employment we were off and running. Either you were on the train or you were on the track. Needless to say, the train was the place to be. There was dissension amongst the rank and file. Even the existing management team were skeptical and unsure. For the first time mission and vision statements were posted. Consultants came in for diversity training and to identify organizational culture and values. New emphasis was placed on training and education, customer service, tacticals, hydrants, public education, public information, new operational procedures, new hires, new equipment, new apparatus, new safety standards and procedures, a new image, quality and accountability. We would obtain an ISO Class 1 Rating, build a new fire station and began a series of annual fire officer development seminars to groom executive fire officers for promotion within.

The problem was that the vision was never shared or communicated. A strategic plan to identify where we were, where we were going and more importantly, how we would get there did not exist.

This new organization struggled and labor/management problems ensued. However, one thing was noticeable. We were providing high quality life safety services to the residents and visitors of our community. But why? How?

In six years the train did not stop and suddenly the conductor was gone, leaving one of the newly developed executive fire officers at the helm struggling to make sense of it all. The train began to slow, at times stop, and even slip backwards occasionally. Why? We were developed. We had the opportunities for the best training and education, the best equipment, a significant budget, a young progressive work force and new young leaders. The answer is simply, his vision was not sold, not shared and we had no plan. Where were we? Where are we? Where are we going? Most importantly, How will we get there? These were the questions we were seeking the answers to.

Two years after his absence history seemed to be repeating itself. The Executive Leadership Course Manual (1998) states, "An executive leader must have the ability to create and articulate a vision that empowers others to transform the vision into action."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interviews of several accomplished leaders, in and out of the fire service, were conducted and comparisons were drawn from information obtained through the literary review.

The purpose of this research paper was to determine the need for an organizational vision as well as identify the elements necessary to develop a vision and strategic plan to facilitate the implementation of that vision.

Contact was made with each interviewee to obtain permission for the interview, brief the individual on the topic, reason and process, and appointments were scheduled. All interviews, whether in person or via phone, were audio-taped with permission in order to ensure accuracy of responses.

Having a vision is not a new concept. However, how to communicate that vision in terms of managing and leading is. The American Heritage Dictionary (1976) defines vision as, "The manner in which one sees or conceives of something; a mental image produced by the imagination; the mystical experience of seeing as if with the eyes of the supernatural or a supernatural being."

Visioning refers to the process of clarifying values, focusing on a mission and stretching the horizon with a vision. However, many definitions exist. Bob Waterman (1987) calls it "pathfinding". Kouzes & Posner (1987) define it as, "A condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists."

The process of creating a vision starts in the mind of the leader, usually a dream for the future of the organization which he leads. "The raw material of the effective vision is invariably the result of one man's or women's soul-searching." (Peters, T and Austin, N., 1985)

"This is where many visions remain dreams. They get stuck in the minds of the leader or reduced to meaningless writing framed on the wall. Once visions are conceived

they must be shaped, crafted and developed in cooperation with those who will live them.” (Belasco, 1990). “A leader’s vision must be communicated to the team, even over communicated, again and again.” (Wagner, 1998)

Pastor Wagner defines an organizational vision as, “...a clearly communicated picture of the future,” to use as a guiding tool to get somebody from where they are to where they want to be.” He further states that, “Having a clearly defined vision helps us avoid being a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none.” (Wagner, 1998). “One of the key characteristics of high-performance organizations and teams is that they have a clear picture of what they are trying to create together, they are excited and clear about their basic purpose and share a common set of values.” (Scott, Joffe and Tobe, 1993).

Once a need is determined for an organizational vision, it is essential that you identify the elements of the visioning process. Although there are as many opinions of the elements as there are organizations, the following five elements as stated by Scott, et al., 1993, were prefaced:

1. *Values* are the principles, the standards, the actions that people in an organization represent, which they consider inherently worthwhile and of the utmost importance. They include: how people treat each other, how people, groups and organizations conduct their businesses and about what is most important to the organization.
2. *Scanning* the current situation involves looking beyond the organization to its customers and suppliers and industry trends for information on what is important to them. Involving the internal customers - the employees - is also an important part of the process.

3. *Mission* is the core purpose for which a person, team or organization is created. It is summarized in a clear, short, inspiring statement that focuses attention in one clear direction by stating the purpose of the individual's business or group's uniqueness.
4. *Visioning* is picturing excellence - what the person, team or organization wants to create in its best possible future. It is an evocative description of what is possible. A vision is not "something out there" that is impractical, but a way of setting a compelling scenario. Creating this image of the future requires the ability to expand one's sense of possibilities and then focus on what new initiatives can lead to success.
5. *Implementation* includes the strategy, plans, procedures and key actions that will put all of the above into action.

"The difficulties of implementation will be minimized. However if top level managers are committed to the process and line managers are convinced of its value at the very onset." (Walter, S., and Choate, P., 1984).

It is important to note that visioning is not a substitute for strategic plans. Visions help to focus the strategic planning process and therefore needs to be developed before planning takes place. The vision must have a buy in. A shared vision is the foundation for making change. Involvement of the shareholders is an important part of the process. "You must include those affected by the implementation of the vision on the front end so there is a sense of ownership and hopefully you will have a buy in on the back end." (Nesmith, 1998).

During the visioning process questions should be established to challenge the process. There are many and they should be designed specifically to the organization and which direction its leader is attempting to take it. Generally they should ask, Who are we? What are we? Where are we? Where are we going? and How will we get there?

PROCEDURES

The procedures utilized to arrive at the final results of this study included an in-depth review of published and non-published literature to establish a comfortable level of literacy of leadership as it pertains to visioning and strategic planning. Research questions were formulated with the intent to utilize the information derived from the questions to identify and analyze the past and present situation of the Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department as it relates to visioning and strategic planning.

Population

Four well respected leaders were identified and solicited to be interviewed. Three were from within the fire service and one from outside the fire service. These individuals were selected based on their reputation for being successful. All were honorable, honest, influential, and have influenced the author professionally, personally and spiritually. They were:

- Alan Brunacini, Fire Chief of the Phoenix Fire Department and author.

- Dave Paulison, Director of the Miami-Dade Fire & Rescue Department and Past President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs
- William Nesmith, Fire Chief of the Hillsborough County Fire Rescue Department and Past President of the Florida Fire Chiefs.
- John Wagner, Pastor of Christ the Rock Community Church in Pembroke Pines, Florida.

Instrumentation

The interview questions were created to support or deny the findings of the research and support the purpose of this study. Responses were compared to challenge the findings.

A six-question interview was conducted of each interviewee using the six original research questions and variations thereof depending on the responses given. This was selected to add another dimension to the literature reviewed. A copy of this interview form is included as "Appendix A".

All interviewees selected were contacted via phone to obtain consent for the interview and establish a convenient time and date for the interview to occur. Local interviews were conducted in person while distant interviews were conducted via speaker phone.

Consent to audiotape was obtained before each interview to assure the author accuracy of quotations and the opportunity to listen and ask additional questions based on

the responses without the distraction of writing. Brief key notes were taken to assist in questioning and to establish and reference points to be utilized when compiling information. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 90 minutes.

Collection of Data

The audio tapes obtained from each interview were reviewed and summarized while specific statements were utilized to support or challenge research findings from the literary review and study.

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that those interviewed answered truthfully and to the best of their knowledge. It is also assumed that they are knowledgeable on the subject, based on their experience, successes or lack of in the problem area. Although those interviewed have been successful leaders and visionaries in both the fire service and the community (church), it is realized that they represent a very small percentage of visionary leaders of the world today and past.

RESULTS

The results of this research study illustrated that indeed Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department lacked a vision. Specifically an organizational vision beyond that of the Fire Chief and his top management team.

More importantly, the study supports the fact that even an organization led by individuals that are visionaries will not be as successful as its potential without the

development of a vision and strategic plan and the ability of the leader to articulate that plan through communication. The information collected, researched and reviewed was valuable in answering the research questions.

1. What is an organizational vision?

A vision is a powerful mental image of what we want to create in the future. There was a broad spectrum of responses and literature reviewed in terms of the definition of an organizational vision. However, it became abundantly clear that many so-called organizational visions may have simply been the leader's vision if it was never a shared vision of the organization due to the lack of a strategic plan for the implementation of the vision. "Visioning refers to the process of clarifying values, focusing a mission and stretching the horizon with a vision. Visioning is a journey from the known to the unknown which help create the future from a montage of facts, hopes, dreams, dangers and opportunities." (Scott, et al., 1993).

A vision captures minds, hearts and spirits giving people a higher purpose for their actions. Usually a vision starts as that of one individual, one leader, but a good leader finds a way to include the organization into the visioning process in order to build upon his or her dream. The vision statement then becomes written in plural instead of singular and should be articulated in present tense therefore reinforcing the gap between the present and the future.

2. Is strategic planning necessary for the implementation of an organizational vision?

The answer to this question was an overwhelming “Yes”. Simply put, “an organizational vision that is not communicated, in fact over communicated with no plan for implementation will never become a shared vision. An organizational vision that is not shared is simply a dream the leader had.” (Wagner, 1998)

“Strategic planning is the continuous process of making present entrepreneurial decisions systematically and with the greatest knowledge of their futurity; organizing the efforts needed to carry out the decision against the expectations through organized, systematic feedback.” (Drucker, 1974) Drucker feels that, “Our vision statements need to be revised and possibly revised every three years. It is not a one-time meeting that a group engages in and then forgets. It has stages that can be accomplished over time.”

3. What are the key elements necessary for the development and implementation of an organizational vision?

There are as many elements key to the development and implementation of a vision as there are books published on leadership and strategic planning. In terms of the creation of a vision there was a common theme amongst those interviewed. An organizational vision must be the leaders, created by the leader and communicated by the leader to become a shared vision.

“It comes from the top of the organization, from the executive team. There are various factors that enter into that shared vision - the political climate, the economic factors. The chief can have a very elaborate vision, but if the money is not there to make it happen

obviously it is not going to occur, or if the money is there but the political climate is not it will fall short also.” (Nesmith, 1998).

“It must be realistic, far reaching but attainable and most importantly tangible.” (Wagner, 1998). “The term ‘organizational vision’ implies that it is shared and that is true in terms of the leader communicating their vision to the troops. The vision must be that of the leaders, created with insight from the most junior fire fighter to the most senior chief officer.” (Paulison, 1998)

In order to develop and implement an organizational vision it takes planning. As stated in the Handbook for Strategic Planning: Airedale Group, “Why plan? Planning achieves the following:

- Sets directions
- Allocates resources
- Examines the alternative courses of action

Improved planning leads to:

- Improved decision-making
- Higher productivity
- Lower risk

Walters, S and Choate, P. (1984), state,

Since responsibility for the creation of a strategic vision and its translation into a strategic plan resides with the CEO, the CEO and other principal executives must have a clear understanding of the logic, costs, benefits, advantages and disadvantages of what is to be done. Equally important,

they must be able to articulate that understanding to others both inside and outside the organization.

“I don’t like strategic plans. I feel if you’re not careful a strategic plan can be so specific that it could interfere with you attaining your vision. A directional plan is more flexible and can point you in the direction of your vision. That’s just my preference. The point is if there’s not a plan your vision can end up just a plaque on the wall and you will lose credibility.” (Paulison, 1998)

4. Is the organizational culture pertinent to the development and implementation of an organizational vision?

Organizational culture is the most important element in implementing the vision. The culture can certainly determine the success of that vision, especially if the vision is going to significantly change the organizational culture. “You should identify the culture prior to finalizing the vision.” (Nesmith, 1998).

The organizational culture is relevant to anything within the organization and can and will change with changes from within and outside the organization. “It is enormously pertinent that the organizational culture drives the vision. The vision does not drive the organizational culture. That is to say who knows better what Ms. Smith needs than the people who are standing in her kitchen.” (Brunacini, 1998) “One of the key characteristics of high-performance organizations and teams is that they have a clear picture of what they are trying to create together, they are excited and clear about their basic purpose and they share a common set of values. The values, mission and vision form the core of their

identity. These key elements constitute the glue that keeps people, teams and organizations responsive and innovative in new situations.” (Scott, et al.,1993)

“An organization’s culture is reflected in its formal and informal principles, policies, procedures, values and attitudes. Often, there are enormous differences in organizational cultures, even among companies in the same business. Whatever these differences are, however, the more the organizational culture supports the formal processes of foresight, goal setting, strategic planning, operational management and evaluation, the stronger the organization will be. Understanding the culture of an organization and shaping it to support strategic activities are therefore essential planning and management tools. The difficulties of implementation will be minimized, however, if top-level managers are committed to the process and line managers are convinced of its value at the very outset, the concept should not be oversold; nor should the time demands, frustrations and costs associated with the new initiative be understated.” (Walter, S., and Choate, P., 1984).

“Creating a strategic vision for an organization and then translating it into strategic plans and operations often require difficult adjustments in attitudes, behavior patterns, and expectations.” (Walter, S., and Choate, P. 1984). “The culture of an organization is immensely crucial in the success or failure of the organization’s efforts toward the implementation of its vision.” (Brunacini, 1998).

5. What are the advantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?

Amy MacLennan’s Independent Study (1987) revealed:

Strategic planning is the process of developing a plan for the future.

Developing a strategy means priorities will be determined by the intelligence and foresight of the people of the organization – not by outside forces and disordered concerns. Having a strategy means that leadership is:

1. Active rather than passive about the institution's future.
2. Focused on keeping the institution in-step with the changing external environment.
3. Aware that higher education is subject to economic market conditions and to increasingly strong competition.
4. Focused on decisions – not on documented plans.
5. Places the fate of the organization above everything else.

Developing and implementing an effective strategy is not easy. It is a blend of rational and economic analysis, political maneuvering, and psychological interplay. It requires participation of the people of the institution and is highly tolerant of controversy.

“The vision provides a healthy sense of urgency, something reasonable, attainable and tangible.” (Wagner, 1998) “If articulated successfully an organizational vision could be very advantageous. An increased interest improved communications creativity in ways such as new programs or new ways of performing existing ones.” (Paulison, 1998). “Vision revisits the values and mission and engages the organization in seeing new possibilities.” (Scott, et al., 1993).

6. What are the disadvantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?

The most common disadvantage has really nothing to do with the creation of an organizational vision, but everything to do with failing to implement that vision. A leader can lose all credibility when a vision statement is framed on a wall and no one in the organization knows about it or there is no plan to do anything with it, whether that be a strategic plan or a directional plan.” (Paulison, 1998)

DISCUSSION

The study results supported those identified through literature review. It was further justified in the summary of the responses given by the problem area “experts” interviewed. It became evident that there is an abundance of measurable benefits associated with a leader creating and implementing an organizational vision. However, the process in attaining the vision and the plan to implement it differed significantly.

All subjects interviewed had a vision and all articulated that vision to various levels throughout their organization. Literature reviewed from business management materials advocated numerous ways of visioning. Chief Dave Paulison states, “The organizational vision needs to start with the leader and be developed, refined and massaged with input up and down the line.”

Chief Alan Brunacini states:

The vision comes from the individuals providing the service, who knows better than the people who are out there serving Mrs. Smith where we need to be headed. But.... That has to be part of the organizational culture. My vision is to support the needs of those delivering the service. Our vision is simple. I only demand three things. You have to go home in the same or better condition you came to work. In other words, don't get hurt or killed. You are not allowed to beat up the customers. You have to be nice to Mrs. Smith and you have to be nice to each other. That's it. The organizational culture will take care of the vision.

Although a very simplistic way of addressing visioning, it influenced this author to view the current situation in our organization from a more simplistic point of view.

Walter, S., and Choate, P., 1984) further refelct:

COMMON SENSE DOMINATES strategic thinking. That is why the public and private organizations that have successfully applied strategic approaches have done so with divergent procedures and techniques. Each has tailored the concepts of foresight, goal setting and strategic planning to the organization's own circumstances, needs, culture, even to the personalities of those involved. ... Top management must be committed to strategic processes; organization must give explicit attention to creating and nurturing a *culture* of strategic management and the most vital catalyst for creating and nurturing this culture is the full support and participation of the fire chief; and time and resources are devoted to defining, understanding

and reassessing the major missions and goals of the organization and to developing long - and short-term policies and actions to achieve those goals.”

A vision needs to be futuristic but reachable, far stretched and attainable, inspiring, motivating but most importantly humanistic. Chief Brunacini stated:

Maybe a leader’s vision should be pictures. Imagine being asked as a leader what is your vision for this organization and showing them a picture of a crew at an auto accident comforting a mother and child as others render aid to the injured husband or father, or a picture of a crew who just came back from Home Depot with supplies standing in Mrs. Smith’s kitchen fixing a leaky pipe. The examples go on and on. Your organizational vision may not state the need to fix leaking pipes for Mrs. Smith whenever she calls, but the culture must understand the importance of meeting her needs.

(Brunacini, 1998).

The following is an example of some of the key elements when developing a vision statement as stated by Scott, et al., 1993. It should be powerful and include the following:

- Presents where we want to go
- Easy to read and understand
- Captures the desired spirit of the organization
- Dynamically incomplete so people can fill in the pieces
- Compact - can be used to guide decision making

- Gets people's attention
- Describes a preferred and meaningful future state
- Can be felt, experienced, gives people goose bumps when they hear it
- Gives people a better understanding of how their individual purpose could be realized in the group or company
- Provides a motivating force, even in hard times
- Is perceived as achievable
- Is challenging and compelling, stretching beyond what is comfortable

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study indicate a clear need for the Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department to develop and implement an organizational vision. In conducting the literature review, evaluating responses from the subject matter "experts" interviewed and reviewing the current situation of the organization, many of the difficulties our organization had been experiencing became obvious.

In retrospect it is difficult to rationalize how we have been as successful as we have in the past eight years. This seemed to emphasize the importance the organizational culture plays in the accomplishments of the organization.

First, the fire chief must formulate his vision. Although it should be his vision, the study shows a greater buy in if that vision becomes shared. He must determine from who he wants input. He must also take a close look at the culture inside and outside the

department in terms of political influence, financial stability, community support and expectations.

“In like manner, the beginning of a new administration (public or private) or the beginning of a renewed term of office for the public CEO is generally an appropriate time to evaluate longer term goals of the institution.” (Walter, S. and Choate, P., 1984).

The development of that vision is relatively the easy part. Communicating that vision and being able to articulate it in such a way that the picture of the future is as clear to everyone that is affected, as it is to he who envisioned it, is of utmost importance. Once the vision has been created and communicated, the next step is where leaders either gain credibility or lose it. The vision describes where the leader sees the organization going in the future. The plan looks at where we are and determines how we will get to where we are going. There are many models available as well as terminology for them, business plan, work plan, directional plan, strategic plan, etc.. Call it what you will but it must be clear, flexible, revisited and adaptable. It must be measurable in terms of steps and mostly, it must be followed.

The common barriers to the successful development and implementation of an organization vision are:

- Too futuristic - unrealistic
- Too long term - no sense of urgency
- Too specific - restrictive
- Forgotten - day to day operations

- Times change - vision doesn't
- Leader specific - never shared
- No input - not organizational

Walter, S., and Choate, P., 1984 stated:

The actions required to introduce, institutionalize, manage and link strategic vision to strategic planning and improved operations do not rely on elaborate models or arcane management techniques. Rather, they are common sense approaches to many actions that public-sector CEO's would take anyway.

However, the advantages of explicitly engaging in this strategic process are those that always flow from using systematic rather than ad hoc approaches: namely, emerging opportunities can be better identified and captured and potentially adverse consequences can be better anticipated and minimized.

It is recommended by this author that the Coral Gables Fire Rescue Department utilize its 1999 labor/management retreat to develop the organizational vision and begin to plan for its implementation. It is recognized that continuous research is needed in this area and it is encouraged that it be continuous.

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APPENDIX A

(Interview Form)

PERSONAL INTERVIEW FORM

CONDUCTED BY: _____

DATE: _____

INTERVIEW OF: _____

TIME: _____

REASON SELECTED: _____

PLACE: _____

INTRODUCTION: My name is Neal R. de Jesus. I am an executive fire officer program participant in The _____ Course. I am conducting an applied research project on **Developing and Implementing an Organizational Vision**. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. In an effort to save time and assure accuracy, may I have your consent to record this interview? You are welcome to a copy of this recording if you wish.

YES _____ NO _____

1. What is an organizational vision?
2. Is strategic planning necessary for the implementation of an organizational vision?
3. What are the key elements necessary to develop and implement an organizational vision?
4. Is organizational culture pertinent to the development and implementation of an organizational vision?
5. What are the advantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?
6. What are the disadvantages of developing and implementing an organizational vision?

This concludes this interview. You are also welcome to a copy of the completed research paper.

YES _____ NO _____

If so, MAILING ADDRESS:

I sincerely appreciated you taking the time from your business schedule to assist me with this research.

Before we close this interview, do you have any questions or requests of me?

Thank you.